

## How should we respond to an evil person?

Written by Bob Stone

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### **Matthew 5:38-42**

When a person's rights are violated, it's all too common to respond in retaliation. The Pharisees of Christ's day, for instance, were so bent on revenge that they sidestepped the clear teaching of the law and took the administration of justice out of the courts and into their own hands. They saw it as a matter of right and duty to personally take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and, in some, cases go beyond that.

It is in this context that Jesus is teaching what is called by many "a hard saying." In Matthew 5:39a, He is stating a principle both admired and resented. Christ calls us to show an attitude of total love toward the one who is evil—v. 39, and our enemies—v. 44. Jesus goes so far as to say we should turn the other cheek. As you can imagine, this instruction has often caused debate and is frequently misunderstood. With abusive situations, violence, and war on the increase, how does this passage apply? In order to understand these verses, we will need to observe a number of important items.

### **The background of the passage**

Verse 38 is an excerpt from the oral teaching of the rabbis, straight from the Mosaic Law. The Law of Moses was a civil and moral code—a guide for personal and moral behavior and also the law of the land. Its scope covered the individual's circumstance and the nation's laws—Ex. 20-23. (See also Exodus 21:34-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21.) Here a wide variety of case laws puts particular emphasis on damage to a person or his property (v. 38 is applied here).

### **[The purpose of the Law](#)**

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What might be the purpose of *God's* law today? Simply, it is to show us our helplessness and lead us to Christ that we might be saved by faith—Gal. 4:24.

All

laws, however, have other practical purposes in a nation's life.

1. **To control chaos.** The Law was given to control a chaotic world and its sins and give it a certain amount of order. Can you imagine a world without any moral law to control its actions?

2. **To create equity.** The judges were to see there was equitable compensation for loss, or equitable punishment for the guilty.

3. **To check revenge.** The principles of justice must check a spirit of retaliation in all of us and see that punishment is never excessive in its demands. Who is to administrate this?

### **The dispensers of justice were the judges/courts of Israel**

The judges were to see that equity was given to both victim and perpetrator. There was no reason for anyone to take the law into their own hands as the Pharisees did. The courts were to dispense justice—to see there was an eye for an eye and no more (Ex. 21:22-29; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:19-20).

With that background, let's take a look at the passage.

### **The Principle Stated in Matthew 5:39**

*"But I tell you, do not resist an evil person."* What's the key word? Resist. It means "to oppose, withstand, or set ourselves against." Against who? An evil person. This is not saying we are to compromise with sin or Satan—Eph. 6:13; 1 Pet. 5:9; James 4:7; Matt. 21:12-17.

It is *the person who wrongs us* that we are not to resist. How do we apply this verse today? The following principles will help us interpret it:

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### Principle #1

**If our interpretation of a passage contradicts the plain and obvious teaching of Scripture at another point, then that interpretation has gone astray.** Scripture must be compared with Scripture, as Scripture best interprets itself. We cannot read our own bias, political persuasion, or wisdom into the interpretation.

Many have not heeded the above principle and insisted that this passage stands alone. Tolstoy, for example, said that having soldiers, police, or even magistrates was inappropriate for Christians. He believed evil was not to be resisted in any way. Many others have exaggerated the application of this verse. Luther tells of a crazy saint who let lice nibble at him and refused to kill them because of these verses.

### Principle #2

**The interpretation must take into account the text—the verses preceding and following the one under consideration.** To whom is this passage addressed? The believer, or the state law enforcement agencies? It is the person who has walked through the beatitudes—i.e., the poor in spirit, the meek, etc.—the context of these verses. (See Matthew 5:3-16 to see the person who is being instructed.)

That leads us to the next principle:

### Principle #3

**This teaching of nonresistance is not for the nations of the world.** It has little to do with the person who is not a Christian, nor is it for nations. This teaching is impossible for anyone who lacks the qualities of the beatitudes. What, then, governs the world?

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The nations and non-Christians are still under the Law which says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." [Remember the purpose of the Law.] "This law is intended for governments alone... which administer it after due process of law and it is not to be applied by the individual himself when he is wronged." R. C. H. Lenski

### Principle #4

**These verses have to do with a Christian's personal relationships and not our relationships as citizens of this country.** Our relationship with our nation must take into account the whole counsel of God (Rom. 13; 1 Pet. 2:11-17), but our attitude toward the action of government, capital punishment, or pacifism is not clearly dealt with in this passage. Generally speaking, if the laws of our nation are violated it is the responsibility of government—the legislative, executive and the courts—to determine the appropriate action. If the action is clearly in opposition to the clear teachings of Scripture, we must respond by using whatever actions available to us under our laws. If the actions taken by our government/the law of the land are defensive or to right wrongs, we should be supportive if at all possible under the guidance of our conscience and, above all, the Scripture.

### The Principles Applied

In verses 39b-42 we see four mini-illustrations of the teaching of verse 39a. It might be said these are snapshots of varying life situations. They don't represent all the ways this principle can be applied; they are *representative* of the ways we are to *act*. They are illustrations—not precepts or laws. Each introduces an evil person who seeks to do us injury, and then shows how verse 39a applies. We will look only at the first one, the most controversial.

Verse 39 applies **when personal rights are attacked**. v. 39—"*But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*"

What does that mean?

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The Eastern culture even today considers the striking of the right cheek as an insult. If you really wanted to insult a man you would walk up and strike him with the back of your hand. In the French Revolution it would cause a duel. When an evil man slaps you physically, emotionally, or spiritually, what do you do in order not to accelerate an already explosive situation?

1. **Don't retaliate.** We are not to seek personal revenge and retaliate blow for blow. (The Old Testament affirmed this in other places—see Lev. 19:18; Prov. 24:29.) What should we do?

2. **Evaluate the impact and intent of the blow.** If it is primarily an insult, and you are not damaged physically or emotionally, then in love seek understanding and reconciliation, not retaliation. That will often diffuse the situation and totally disarm the other person. If the blow was damaging to you physically or emotionally evasive, defensive actions are appropriate (i.e., running, self-defense, screaming, reasoning, police). We are never asked to be someone's regular punching bag.

You might say: "Oh, come on, a guy slaps me in the face and I'll deck him so fast he won't know what hit him." Jesus says that's exactly what He doesn't want you to do. He doesn't want that kind of lifestyle for a Christian. (See 1 Pet. 2:23.)

What this teaching did was to go beyond what the law says, or even socially accepted practices. It calls us to exhibit the character of Christ. Now does that mean we do nothing?

1. What did Jesus do at a cliff? (He escaped.)—Lk. 4:29-30.

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2. What did Mary & Joseph do in Matt. 3:13-18? (They fled.)

3. How did Paul respond when his legal rights were violated?—Acts 16:15-38; 23:1-4. He waited until the right time and did not retaliate in anger—in fact, he and Silas sang. But when he was released he appealed to the law and to God for equity. When released He did not retaliate in anger (e.g., "You beat me without a trial and I'm a Roman citizen. I will have your heads for this"). What did he say? Look at verse 37. *"But Paul said to the officers: 'They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.'"*

In Acts 16, Paul used the law to accomplish what was needed. Only after he had done what he wanted to do, did he leave the city. Jesus isn't asking that we be as weak as doormats. Only the strong person with control over himself and a love for others who can do this. Did Paul ever blow it? (Yes! Look at Acts 23:1-5.)

4. How did Jesus respond when He was struck? Was it, "Why did you hit me? Take these chains off me and I'll knock your head off." No! Look at John 18:19-23. He tried to bring the testimony against Him into a legal arena. He then questioned His attacker, *"Why did you hit me?"* —John 18:19-23. When people are trying to explain their actions, they are usually not hitting you at the same time. So, get them talking and not hitting—Is. 50:6.

On another occasion, however, Jesus did it differently. He didn't say a word, because He wanted us to live—Matt. 27:30. *"They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again."* Why didn't Jesus hit back? Even though he had the capacity, he did not because He wanted us to live. Likewise, acting like Jesus often releases His life to others—Acts 7:54-8:1.

## The Principle Applied To Today

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With the above examples in mind, let's seek to **apply** this principle to current needs in our society:

[\(See also the section on Husband and wife battering on this site.\)](#)

### **Violence in adolescence**

How do you apply this teaching to children who are fighting on the playground at school? What is the appropriate response for a child who is hit by a classmate? How about gang activity in major cities of our country; how does this teaching apply to that kind of situation? What would be your responsibility in that kind of situation as a Christian citizen? **Violence in sports**

What is good about a child's/youth's involvement in school athletics? What can it teach? As a parent, what teaching/training from a Christian perspective needs to accompany children's involvement? How would this passage impact your teaching?

### **Violence in the media**

What causes you the most concern about violence in children's programming? What safeguards have you/would you impose on a child's television watching?

### **Domestic violence**

Where do you believe most people learn violent behavior? What is the biggest cause of it? How did anger/or the lack of it affect your home when you were growing up?

### **Intense anger**

What should we do when we feel intense anger toward an enemy? How do the Imprecatory Psalms help us? (See Psalm 69:7-20; 88:3-9; 98; 133; 23:5-6; 12, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 83, 109, 137, 140, etc.)

Gordon Fee wrote this about the Imprecatory psalms:

".....It is surely true that expressing one's anger verbally—letting it out in words as it were—is better than letting it out in violent actions. Parts of certain psalms help us in just this way, and with an added dimension. They guide or channel our anger to and through God verbally, rather than to or at anyone else, verbally or physically. Psalms that contain verbalizations to God of anger at others are called imprecatory psalms....

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The imprecatory psalms do not contradict Jesus' teaching to love our enemies. We tend wrongly to equate "love" with "having a warm feeling toward." Jesus' teaching, however, defines love actively. It is not so much how you feel about a certain person, but what you do for that person that shows love (Luke 10:25-37). The biblical command is to do love, not to feel love. In a related way, the imprecatory psalms help us, when we feel anger, not to do anger.

We should honestly express our anger to God, no matter how bitterly and hatefully we feel it, and let God take care of justice against those who misuse us. The foe who continues evil in the face of our forbearance is in big trouble indeed (Rom. 12:20). The proper function of these psalms, then, is to help us not to be 'overcome by evil,' but to help free us from our anger, that we might 'overcome evil with good' (Rom. 12:21)—A quote from Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, Academy Books, Zondervan Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1982, pp. 182-184.)

### **War and violence in our world**

Read first [the purpose of all laws](#).

1. If all laws are given to control a chaotic world and its sins and give it a certain amount of order, can you imagine a world without any moral law to control its actions? (Describe that world.)
2. If the principles of justice must check a spirit of retaliation in all of us and see that punishment is never excessive in its demands, who is to administrate this justice?
3. What are the pluses and minuses of having our government wage war on violence, terrorist attacks and crime?
4. Is it ever appropriate to participate in civil disobedience? Why?
5. How should we pray for government, the military and law enforcement agencies in the light of their responsibility?
6. As a Christian citizen, what is your responsibility in the time of war or when injured people need help?